

Norfolk's Roadside Nature Reserves (RNRs)

Images by: David North, Barry Madden, Steve Cale and Mark Ollett

Norfolk's roadside verges stretch for literally thousands of miles and are such an integral part of the landscape that it is easy to take them for granted. Yet many verges contain plant species that, although once common, are now nationally rare or scarce. To help to protect them, these special sites are designated Roadside Nature Reserves (RNRs) under the Roadside Nature Reserve Scheme, and are individually managed to benefit the plants and animals that live there. There are currently 110 RNRs (as of last update May 2013), with a combined length of over 15 kilometres, and new verges are designated each year.

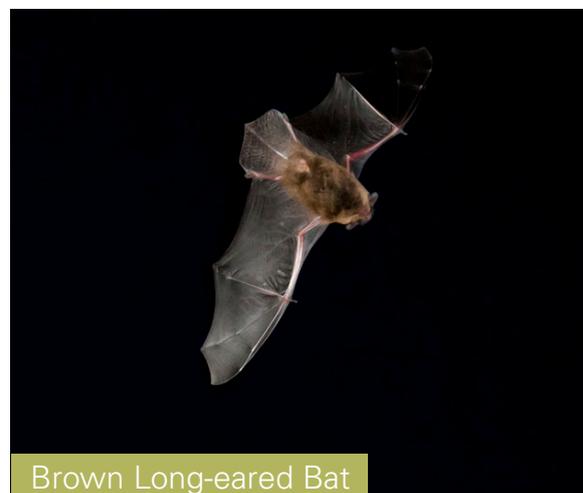
The Historical and Ecological Importance of Roadside Verges

Many roadside verges are very old, lining routes that have changed little since they were laid down centuries ago. These verges represent tiny fragments of the unimproved, semi-natural grassland that was once widespread throughout the country, but which has declined by 98% since 1945, as a result of changes of land use, intensive cultivation and drainage.

In the past, road verges were cropped for hay, or grazed by domestic livestock as they were moved around the countryside. Hand-scything continued in some places until the end of the 1950s, with the cuttings raked up and used for hay. This form of management produced the species-rich grassland that still exists on some verges today. As a result, roadside verges are among the few remaining places, along with churchyards, where plants that were once common can still be seen growing in the wild.

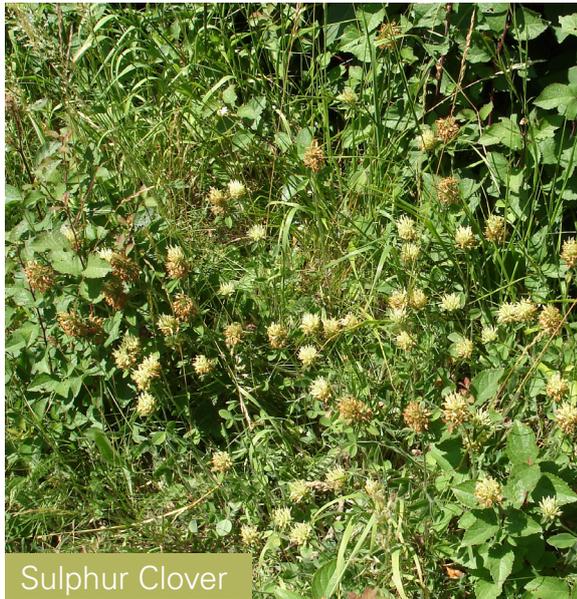
Most RNRs are important for scarce and unusual plants, including sulphur clover, pyramidal orchid, pepper saxifrage, Dyer's greenweed, adder's tongue, sandy stilt puffball, fragrant agrimony, sand catchfly, crested cow-wheat, breckland speedwell and purple broomrape.

By their very nature, Roadside Nature Reserves are linear, and they act as wildlife corridors for many species, providing ideal hunting grounds for species such as raptors and bats.



Brown Long-eared Bat

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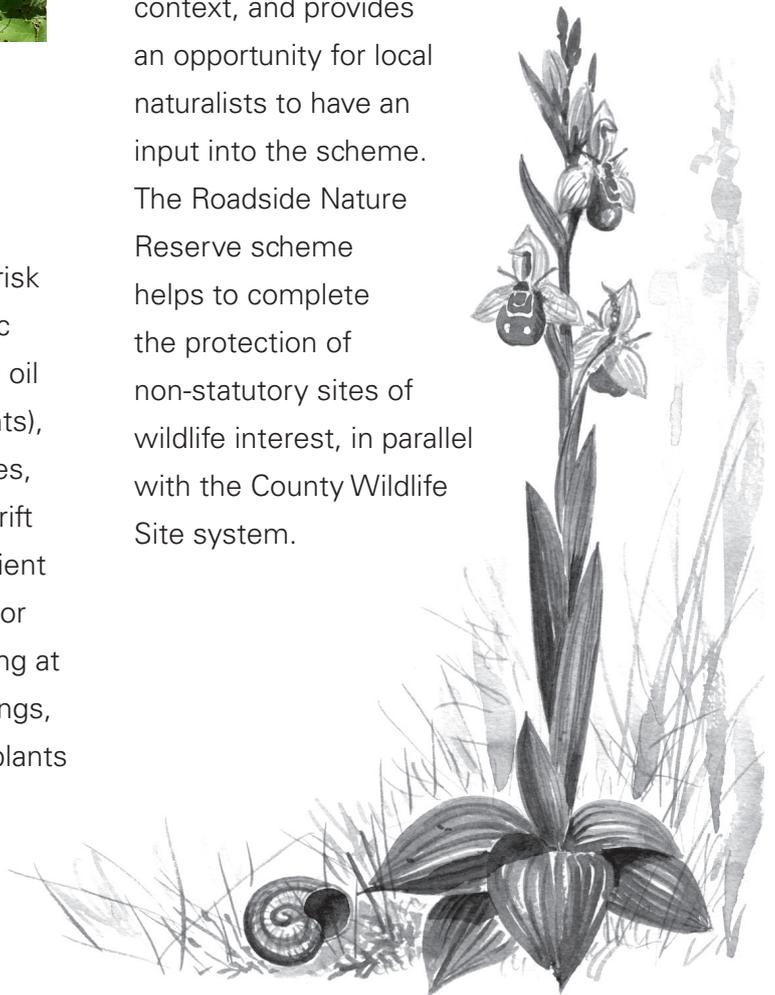
Sulphur Clover

Are Roadside Verges Safe from Damage?

Even though verges are unlikely to be ploughed up or sprayed, they are still at risk and vulnerable to serious damage. Traffic pollution, road run-off (which can contain oil and fuel residues, salt and other pollutants), compaction and disturbance from vehicles, road widening and drainage, and spray drift from nearby fields all threaten these ancient grassland sites. A lack of management, or inappropriate management such as cutting at the wrong time and non-removal of cuttings, can also, over time, destroy the special plants which are often present in small numbers.

The Roadside Nature Reserve Scheme

The scheme was launched in the mid-1990s, and is run jointly by Norfolk County Council and Norfolk Wildlife Trust, in consultation with a range of other organisations, including the Norfolk Biodiversity Information Service, Norfolk Flora Group, Norfolk Mycology Group, Butterfly Conservation and the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society. This partnership helps to ensure that RNRs are viewed in a wider conservation context, and provides an opportunity for local naturalists to have an input into the scheme. The Roadside Nature Reserve scheme helps to complete the protection of non-statutory sites of wildlife interest, in parallel with the County Wildlife Site system.



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Management of RNRs

RNRs are demarcated with posts which identify the stretch of special interest. The majority are surveyed each year by a team of volunteer surveyors, to monitor the condition both of the verge and the plant or fungi species of particular interest. All records for RNRs are held by Norfolk Wildlife Trust at their Norwich office.

Where appropriate, some verges are cut by the Highways Department, but many RNRs are individually managed by specialist staff at the County Council, together with a team of volunteers, to ensure the survival of the species of interest. This form of management usually involves:

- ensuring that the verge is cut at the most appropriate time(s)
- using a reciprocating mower which mimics the action of a traditional scythe, rather than a modern mower which mulches the cuttings making them more difficult to collect up
- removing all cuttings to ensure that they do not mulch and smother the grass

Planning authorities and utilities are provided with a yearly update of the location of RNRs and are requested to contact Norfolk Wildlife Trust or Norfolk County Council in the case of works likely to affect the verge.

For information regarding site records, location of RNRs, candidate verges, contact:

Helen Backowska (Conservation Officer)

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Bewick House
22 Thorpe Road
Norwich
NR1 1RY

Tel: 01603 625540

Email: HelenB@norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk

For information regarding management of individual verges, contact:

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